

Latino/a Seminarians' Vocational Motivations and Views about the Church's Role in Society

Introduction

The next generation of religious leaders in the United States will guide their congregations through some profound shifts in identity and composition. As the United States becomes ever more diverse, pastors will need to reach beyond the traditional parameters of their communities and bring people from differing backgrounds and experiences together in service to one another and the broader community.

About the Series

This is the third in a series of Latino Research@ND reports focusing on Latinos/as and theological education. For information about the other reports in the series, go to www.nd.edu/~cslr.

will help Latino congregations assume a vital role in shaping the civic life of their surrounding communities.

To gauge what kind of leaders will shepherd Latino churches in the upcoming years, this report examines the vocational motivations and aspirations of Latino/a seminarians¹ and analyzes their views about the role that churches should play in society. We find that Latinos/as pursue theological education out of a desire to serve others and are not generally interested in overtly changing society in a particular ideological direction.

¹ For the sake of simplification, we use the term "seminarian" in this paper to refer to students enrolled in master's-level programs at a seminary or school of theology, regardless of whether they intend to become an ordained priest or minister. Nearly all of the students in our sample study at institutions affiliated with the Association of Theological Schools (ATS)—an organization of more than 250 member graduate schools that conduct post-baccalaureate professional and academic degree programs designed to prepare persons for a wide variety of positions of ministerial leadership and teaching and research in the theological disciplines. Most Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox graduate schools of theology in North America are affiliated with ATS, including those run by particular denominations, dioceses, or religious orders whose primary but not necessarily exclusive focus is to prepare people for ordained ministry within that denomination. ATS does not include undergraduate colleges or other non-master's conferring institutions. For more information on ATS and its member institutions, go to www.ats.edu.

About the Researchers

Edwin I. Hernández, a research fellow with the Center for the Study of Latino Religion, is foundations



research director at the DeVos Family Foundations. His current research includes an extensive survey of Latino congregations

in Chicago and a comprehensive study of religious congregations in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Dr. Hernández is coauthor of *Citizens of Two Worlds: Religion and Politics among American Seventh-day Adventists*, *AVANCE: A Vision for a New Mañana*, and *Reconstructing the Sacred Tower: Challenge and Promise of Latino/a Theological Education*. Recent publications include the edited book *Emerging Voices, Urgent Choices: Essays on Latino/a Religious Leadership* and the reports "Answering the Call: How Latino Churches Can Respond to the HIV/AIDS Epidemic" and "Equipped to Serve: Latino/a Seminarians and the Future of Religious Leadership in the Latino/a Community."

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However, they express strong support for religious congregations taking action concerning issues such as poverty, racism, and the environment and they favor collaborating with government agencies, public officials, and people of other faiths to do so.

Vocational Goals

Our survey shows that the majority (71 percent) of Latinos/as in seminary are on an ordination track, with 17 percent already ordained and 54 percent planning to be so. In comparison, a slightly higher percentage of African American seminarians (77 percent) and a considerably smaller percentage of white non-Hispanic seminarians (60 percent) are on an ordination track.²

Nearly six out of ten (59 percent) Latino/a seminarians are pursuing Masters of Divinity degrees (MDiv). A similar share of the white non-Hispanic seminarian student body (60 percent) and a slightly larger percentage of the African American seminarian student body (66 percent) are enrolled in MDiv programs. An MDiv is the most common preparatory degree for both Catholic and Protestant ministers — a reality that is reflected in our finding that 90 percent of Latinos/as in Master of Divinity programs plan to be ordained. In comparison, less than half (47 percent) of Latino/a seminarians in other degree programs are on an ordination track.

² All data about white and African American seminarians come from the Auburn survey.

Figure 1
Latino/a Seminarians' Future Ministry Plans, by Ordination Track and Program

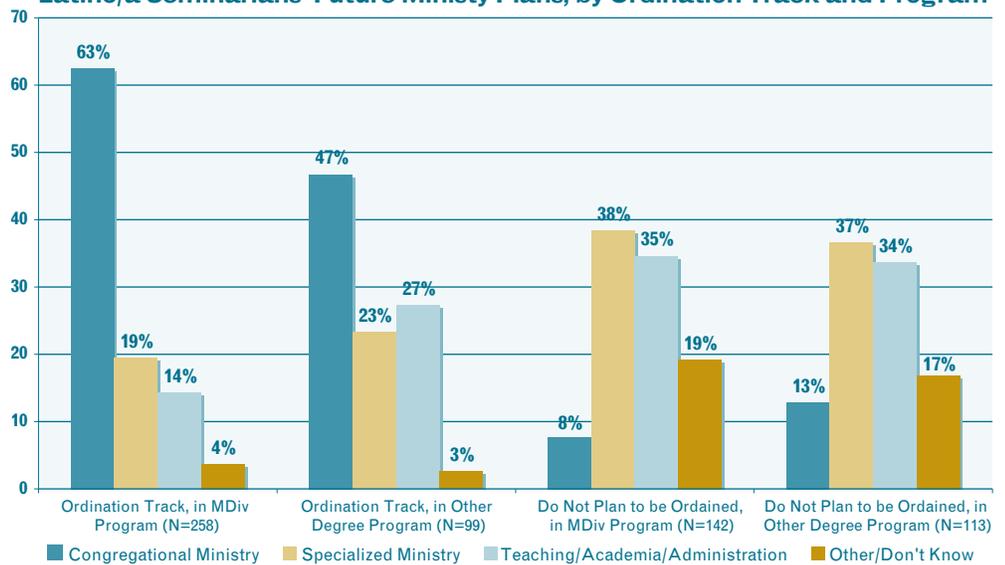


Figure 2
Percentage of Latino/a Seminarians on Ordination Track, by Gender and Denomination

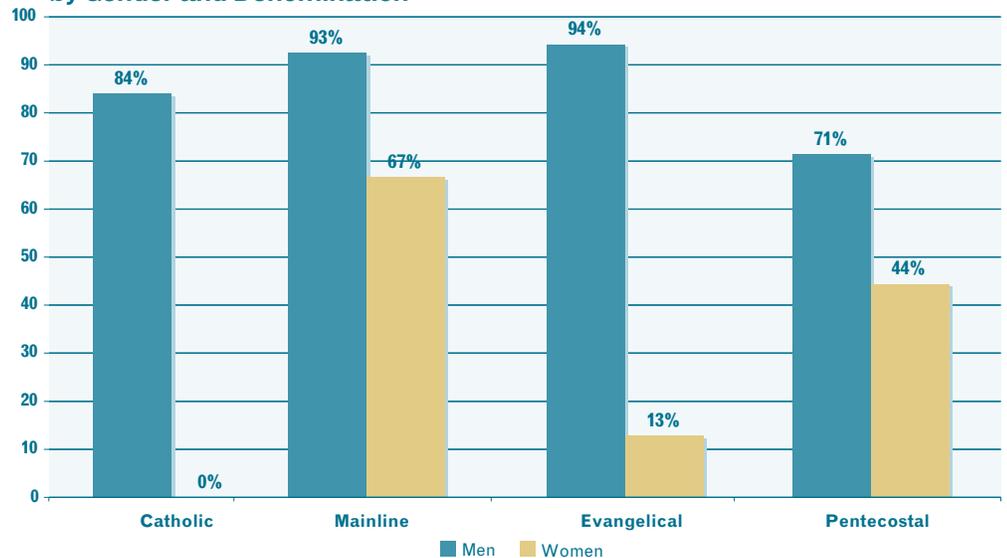


Table 1
Motivations for Attending Seminary Rated Very Important or Important, by Race/Ethnicity

Motivation	Latinos/as	African Americans	White non-Hispanics
Sense of call from God	96%	98%	93%
Desire to serve others	95%	96%	92%
Desire for personal growth	90%	91%	82%
Desire for spiritual fulfillment	89%	91%	81%
Desire to bring about change in the religious community	73%	75%	59%
Intellectual interests/theological questions	68%	67%	70%
Desire to lead a worshipping community	68%	67%	58%
Desire to preserve my religious tradition	51%	50%	41%
Desire to bring about change in society in a conservative direction	44%	39%	30%
Desire to bring about change in society in a liberal direction	36%	42%	28%
Desire to please family	8%	10%	3%
Desire for social status	5%	4%	1%
Desire to please mentor	2%	6%	2%

Though most Latino/a seminarians intend to be ordained, their ministerial aspirations vary considerably. Roughly 44 percent plan to enter congregational ministry (including new church development and music ministry); 25 percent hope to pursue specialized ministry (youth or campus ministry, counseling, spiritual direction, or chaplaincy); and 23 percent are headed on to teaching, further studies, or church administration (the remaining 8 percent answered “don’t know” or “other”).

Not surprisingly, we found a strong correlation between our respondents’ ordination plans and the kind of ministry they hope to pursue. As Figure 1 shows, seminarians who are or plan to be ordained are much more likely to be heading toward congregational ministry compared with those who will not be ordained, particularly those enrolled in Master of Divinity programs. Specifically, 63 percent of seminarians who are in an MDiv program and on an ordination track plan to enter congregational ministry compared to just 8 percent of those in an MDiv program who do not plan to be ordained.

Ordination intentions vary within our sample along denominational lines, with Mainline Protestants considerably more likely to be on an ordination track (82 percent) than Evangelicals (69 percent), Catholics (67 percent), or Pentecostals (64 percent).³ However Mainline Protestants are not significantly more likely to be heading toward congregational ministry (52 percent) than either Evangelicals (47 percent) or Catholics (43 percent). In comparison, only 30 percent of Pentecostals intend to enter congregational ministry.

Our analysis also found a considerable gender disparity in Latino/a seminarians’ ordination plans, with 86 percent of Latinos indicating that they are or plan to be ordained compared to just 39 percent of Latinas. This discrepancy is clearly related to the fact that many denominations do not ordain women.⁴ Indeed, none of the Catholic women said they intend to be ordained while 67 percent of female Mainline Protestants do (see Figure 2).

We found a corresponding difference between our male and female respondents’ ministry plans, particularly in the area of congregational ministry, which 52 percent of the men indicated they want to pursue vs. 29 percent of the women. Correspondingly, higher percentages of Latina seminarians are going into specialized ministry (38 percent vs. 20 percent of Latinos). However, Latinas are neither more nor less likely than Latinos to be going on to academic or administrative positions (22 percent of both men and women said they plan to do so).

³ For the purposes of analysis, Protestant denominations were categorized as follows: Southern Baptist Convention, Seventh-day Adventist, Church of the Nazarene, Christian and Missionary Alliance, and the Baptist General Conference are considered ‘Evangelical’; Assemblies of God, Iglesia Evangélica Unida, The Foursquare Church, Pentecostal, and nondenominational are considered ‘Pentecostal’; and the American Baptist Churches USA, Disciples of Christ, Episcopal Church, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Reformed Church in America, and Metropolitan Community Church are considered ‘Mainline.’

⁴ While all of the denominations in the Mainline Protestant subgroup ordain women, the Roman Catholic Church and most of the churches within the Evangelical subgroup do not. The Pentecostal denominations represented in our sample have less formal stances about women’s ordination and tend to vary in the practice on a congregational or regional basis.

Data Sources and Methodology

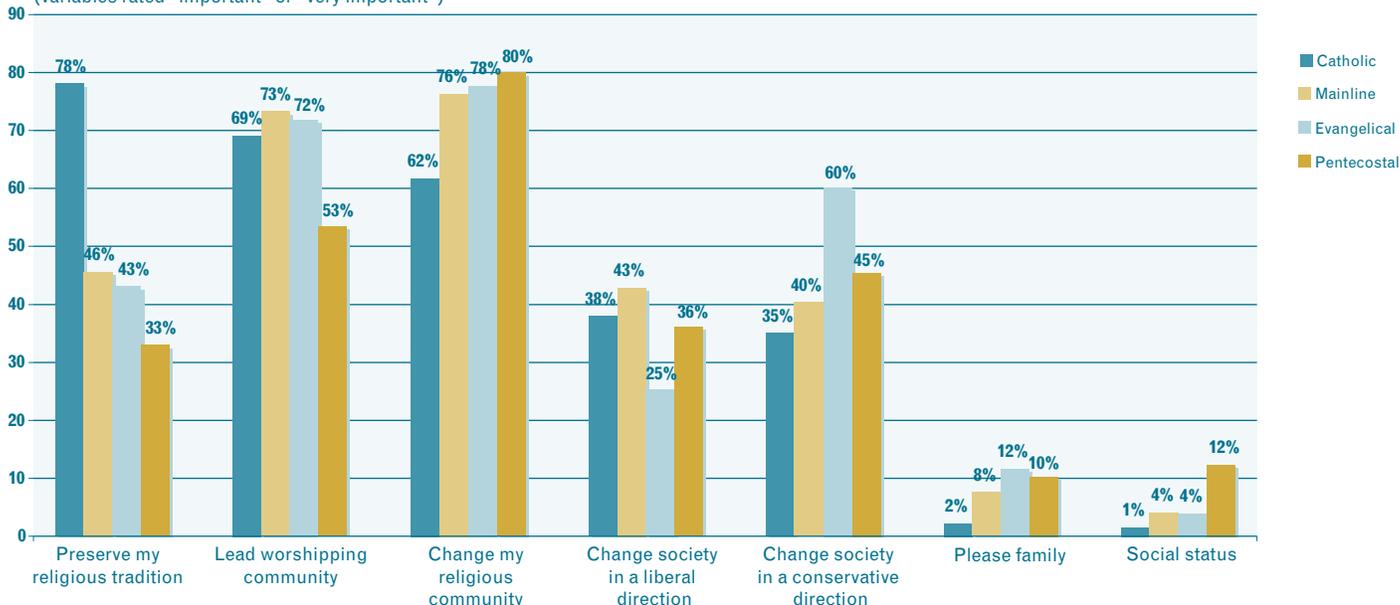
This report is based upon the 2004 Latino/a Seminarian Survey. The bilingual survey was created by the Center for the Study of Latino Religion at the University of Notre Dame and sent to the 67 seminaries and schools of theology in the United States and Puerto Rico that together accounted for 82 percent of Latinos/as enrolled in master’s-level theological education in the academic year 2001–2002 (the year immediately prior to our study’s commencement). Parts of the questionnaire were designed so that the responses could be compared with a survey that the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education conducted in 1999 with students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds at Association of Theological Schools (ATS)-affiliated institutions. The Auburn data set reflects the responses of 2,512 respondents, which represents 25 percent of the total to whom Auburn surveys were mailed (go to www.auburnsem.org/study for more information about the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education).

To ensure the highest response rate possible for our survey, we sent letters to the appropriate deans at each institution and asked them to recruit someone to distribute surveys and encourage student participation. These on-site coordinators were instructed to distribute the survey questionnaires among US-based Hispanic students—that is, Latino/a seminarians and students of theology who could or were planning to minister in the United States or Puerto Rico, the names of whom were supplied by the institution’s registrar. Data were collected in two waves—the first from spring to early fall of 2003 and the second during winter to spring of 2004. In all, 523 completed surveys were collected, which represents a 23.4 percent response rate.

Figure 3

Latino/a Seminarians' Motivations for Attending Seminary, by Denomination

(variables rated "important" or "very important")



Motivations for Attending Seminary

To get a sense of what motivates Latinos/as to pursue theological training, we asked survey participants to rate the importance of a series of possible reasons for attending seminary (Table 1). We find that Latino/a seminarians have similar motivations to those of their non-Latino/a counterparts. All three groups are most driven by a sense of call from God and a desire to serve others, followed by personal growth and spiritual fulfillment. In contrast, few seminarians of any race or ethnicity go to seminary to please family members or mentors, or to achieve social status.

Unlike the desire to serve others, the desire to move society in a particular ideological direction motivates comparatively few Latino/a seminarians. More Latinos/as identified changing society in a conservative direction (44 percent) than doing so in a liberal direction (36 percent) as an important reason for going to seminary.⁵ The percentage

of Latino/a seminarians who ranked moving society in a conservative direction an important motivation (44 percent) is significantly higher than the percentage of white non-Hispanic seminarians who did so (30 percent) but only slightly higher than that indicated by African American seminarians (39 percent). In contrast, a higher percentage of African American seminarians (42 percent) said making society more liberal had been an important motivation for pursuing theological study compared to 36 percent of Latinos/as and 28 percent of whites (Table 1).

Among Latino/a seminarians, we found substantial denominational differences in reported reasons for attending seminary (Figure 3). More Catholics rated preserving their religious tradition an important motivator (78 percent) than did Protestants of any kind (46 percent of Mainline Protestants, 43 percent

of Evangelicals, and 33 percent of Pentecostals). Correspondingly more Protestants than Catholics indicated being motivated to attend seminary by a desire to change their religious community (80 percent of Pentecostals, 78 percent of Evangelicals, and 76 percent of Mainline Protestants did so compared to 62 percent of Catholics). We also found that Evangelicals were the most likely to say that making society more conservative was an important reason for going to seminary (60 percent vs. 45 percent of Pentecostals, 40 percent of Mainline Protestants, and 35 percent of Catholics) and the least likely to be motivated by making society more liberal (25 percent vs. 36 percent of Pentecostals, 38 percent of Catholics, and 43 percent of Mainline Protestants).

The denominational tendencies toward changing society in a particular ideological direction somewhat correspond with the political and theological views of

⁵ Since the survey questionnaire used the terms "liberal" and "conservative" without defining them, respondents' answers about moving society in either direction reflect their own interpretations of the terms.



Table 2
Latino/a Seminarians' Self-Identified Political and Theological Views, Overall and by Denomination

Political Views			
	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal
Overall sample	36%	43%	21%
Catholic	14%	59%	27%
Mainline	28%	41%	31%
Pentecostal	53%	31%	16%
Evangelical	63%	34%	3%

Theological Views			
	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal
Overall sample	40%	38%	20%
Catholic	26%	48%	26%
Mainline	35%	39%	26%
Pentecostal	51%	32%	17%
Evangelical	61%	33%	6%

Table 3
Seminarians' Self-Identified Political and Theological Views, by Race/Ethnicity

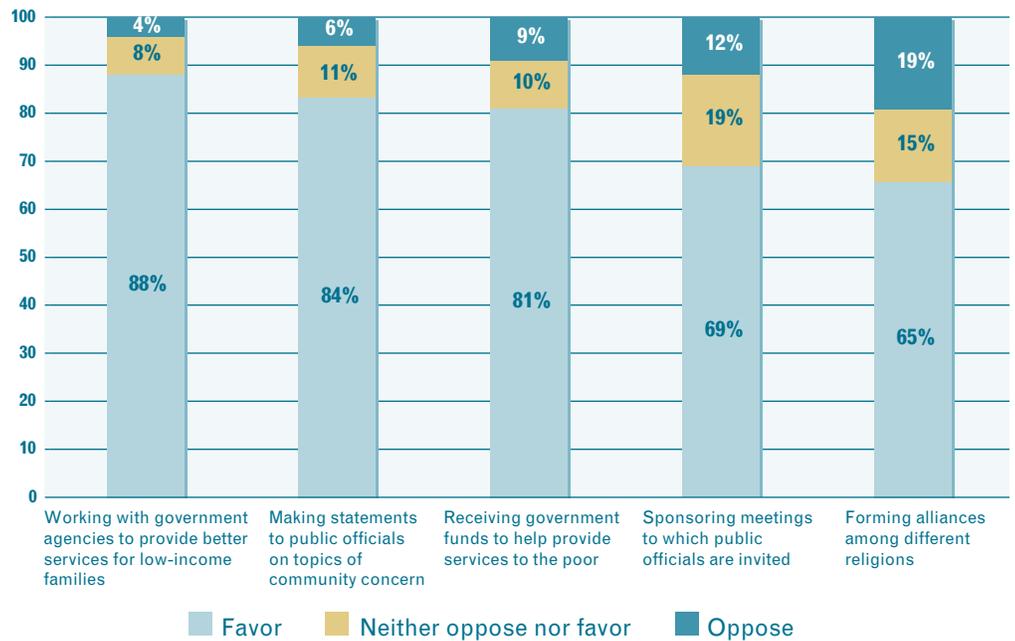
Political Views			
	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal
Latinos/as	36%	43%	21%
African Americans	26%	36%	38%
White non-Hispanics	40%	29%	30%

Theological Views			
	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal
Latinos/as	41%	39%	20%
African Americans	39%	29%	33%
White non-Hispanics	44%	26%	30%

our survey respondents. As Table 2 illustrates, Latino/a Evangelical seminarians are the most likely to describe themselves as political (63 percent) and theological conservatives (61 percent), followed by Pentecostals (53 percent and 51 percent, respectively). But while higher percentages of Latino/a Mainline and Catholic seminarians describe themselves as political liberals (31 percent and 27 percent, respectively) than either Pentecostals (16 percent) or Evangelicals (just 3 percent) the differences are not as dramatic. So too, the Catholic and Mainline Protestants who participated in our study did not overwhelmingly identify as theological liberals (Table 2).

As Table 3 shows, Latino/a seminarians identify as political (21 percent) and theological (20 percent) liberals at lower rates than their non-Latino counterparts, particularly African

Figure 4
Latino/a Seminarians' Views toward Churches Engaging in Civic Activities



The Center for the Study of Latino Religion was founded in 2002 within Notre Dame's Institute for Latino Studies to serve as a national center and clearinghouse for ecumenically focused research on the US Latino church, its leadership, and the interaction between religion and community. For more information, please go to www.nd.edu/~cslr.



American seminarians of whom 38 percent describe themselves as political liberals and 33 percent as theological liberals. But this does not mean that Latino/a seminarians are comparatively the most conservative of the three groups. Rather, similar percentages of Latino/a (36 percent) and white (40 percent) seminarians identify as political conservatives, while differences in the rates of theological conservatives found among the three student groups are insignificant (44 percent of whites, 41 percent Latinos/as, and 39 percent of African Americans identify as such).

Views about the Role of Churches in Society

Another indicator of what role Latino/a seminarians are likely to assume in their communities is their understanding of the church's role in the broader society. To get a sense of this, we asked survey respondents to indicate their support or opposition to a series of activities and collaborations in which churches might participate (Figure 4). The majority of Latino/a seminarians support churches engaging in these activities, which indicates that they hold a generally positive view toward churches taking an active role in society. Nearly nine out of ten (88 percent) support religious congregations working with government agencies to assist the poor, and eight out of ten (81 percent) favor churches receiving government funds for such services. Most also support churches making public statements about community concerns (84 percent), and smaller but significant numbers believe that churches should both host meetings

Figure 5
Percentage of Latino/a Seminarians Who Favor Churches Engaging in these Civic Activities, by Denomination

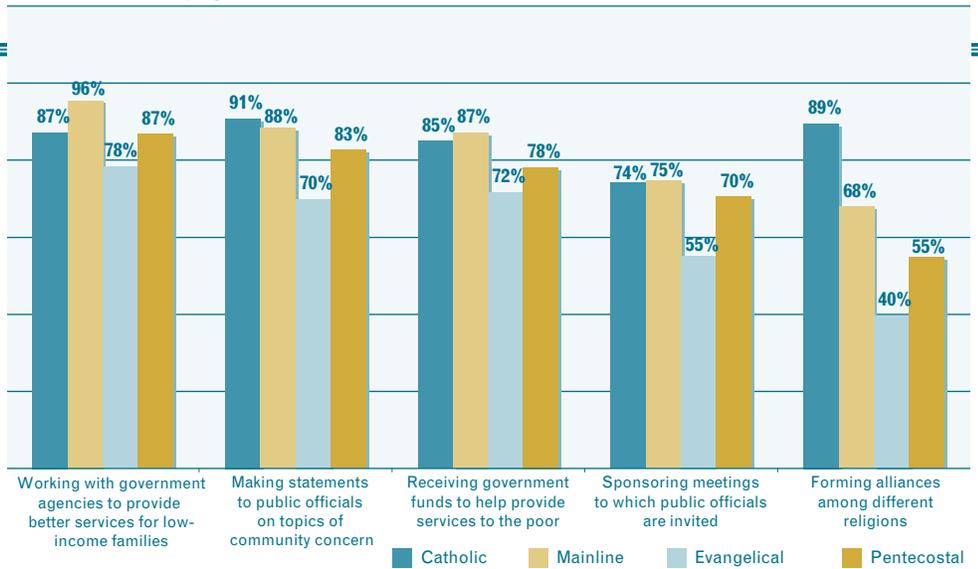


Figure 6
Latino/a Seminarians' Views toward Whether Religious Groups Should Be More or Less Active in These Civic Activities

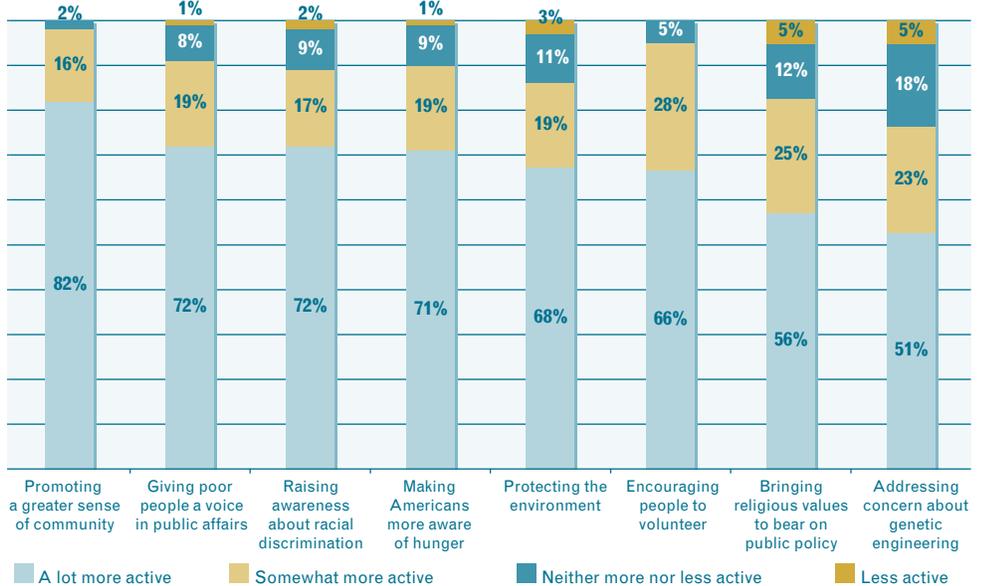
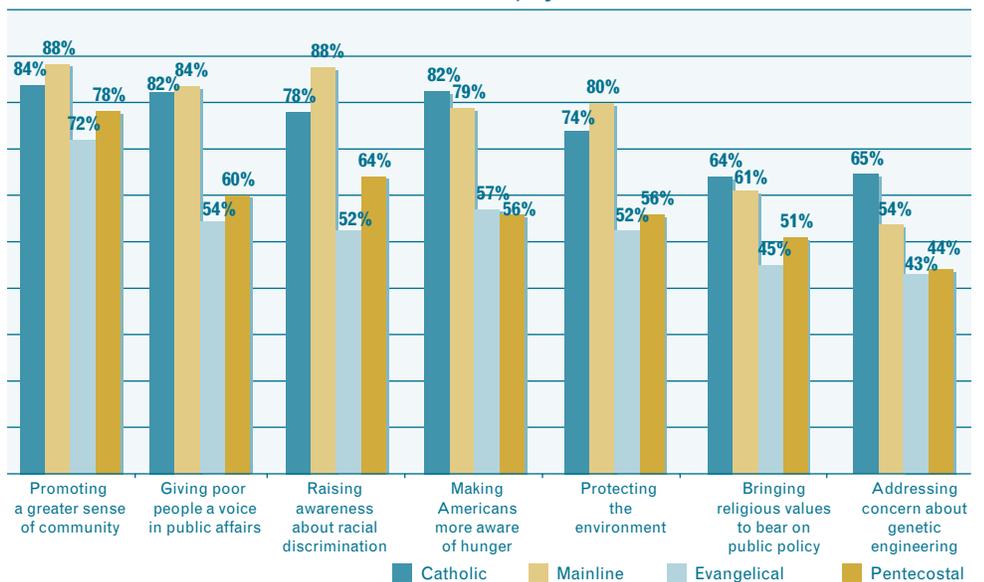


Figure 7
Percentage of Latino/a Seminarians Who Believe Religious Groups Should Be A Lot More Active in these Civic Activities, by Denomination



with public officials (69 percent) and form interfaith alliances (65 percent).

Here, too, we found significant denominational variances (Figure 5),⁶ most notably in opinions of churches forming interfaith alliances, about which Catholics expressed markedly higher levels of support than any of the Protestant groups (89 percent vs. 68 percent of Mainline Protestants, 40 percent of Evangelicals, and 55 percent of Pentecostals). Overall, Evangelicals expressed the lowest levels of support for churches taking these kinds of civic action, and Catholics and Mainline Protestants the highest (Figure 5). These denominational trends remained evident even after we controlled for age, gender, and nativity.

Our survey participants also show generally strong support for the church advocating for social causes. As

⁶ All variances significant at $p \leq .05$.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our research finds that Latino/a seminarians pursue theological education because of a sense of call from God and a desire to serve others. Most plan to be ordained and most are enrolled in a Master of Divinity program, but their future plans vary to include congregational ministry; specialized ministries such as chaplaincy and counseling; and further studies, teaching, and church administration positions.

Though the majority of Latino/a seminarians do not cite moving society in either a conservative or liberal direction as an important reason for attending seminary, Latino/a seminarians are more likely to say moving society in a conservative direction was important to them than either their African American or white non-Hispanic counterparts. In contrast, African American seminarians are more likely to pursue theological education in the hope of moving society in a liberal direction.

Catholic seminarians are more likely to be motivated by a desire to preserve their religious tradition, and Protestants by a desire to change it. Evangelicals demonstrate a considerably greater tendency to be motivated by moving society in a conservative direction and to describe themselves as politically and theologically conservative, whereas Mainline Protestants and Catholics are somewhat more likely than Evangelicals and Pentecostals to be motivated by making society more liberal.

As for attitudes towards the role of religious congregations in the broader society, we find that Latino/a semi-

Figure 6 illustrates, two-thirds or more said churches should be “a lot more active” in every area except genetic engineering and bringing religious values to bear on public policy, about which half of the respondents still indicated that the church should be a lot more active.

As with attitudes toward collaborating with government and interfaith groups, attitudes toward churches overtly advocating on behalf of social causes vary along denominational lines (Figure 7). Here Pentecostal Latino/a seminarians' views align more closely with their Evangelical counterparts than we saw in Figure 5, with respondents from both groups consistently less likely to endorse churches taking a more active role in these matters than either Catholic or Mainline Protestant Latino/a seminarians (Figure 7)—trends that persist even after taking respondent's age and place of birth into consideration.

narians generally support churches taking an active role in society, including making public statements about community concerns. They strongly support churches promoting a greater sense of community and encouraging people to volunteer, and are in favor of churches taking public stances about issues such as racism, poverty, hunger, and the environment. Moreover, they favor engaging in such civic activities in collaboration with government agencies and public officials, including receiving government funds. They also support making interfaith alliances. The level of enthusiasm for congregations engaging in these activities varies denominationally, however, with Mainline Protestants and Catholics reporting higher levels of support than Pentecostals and particularly Evangelicals, who report the lowest levels of support for such activities.

Our findings suggest that with the guidance of this generation of religious leaders, Latino/a congregations will not exist on the margins of US society but will take an active role in the civic and social life of the broader culture. Though the shape and focus of this engagement will vary according to the geography, theology, and composition of a given congregation, our study indicates that this engagement will not be overtly ideological or political but will entail taking public stances on social issues. What is more, our survey respondents illustrate that Latino/a religious leaders will not shy away from collaborating with government agencies or interfaith groups in order to provide better services to people in need.

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About the Researchers *continued from cover*

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